



Tips for Parents: What Age Can My Child Stay Home Alone?

What is the minimum age kids must be to stay home alone? What does the law say? What do experts recommend? You'll get answers to these questions and more in this Tips for Parents.

Laws Vary by State

There is no national law regarding a child's minimum age to stay home alone. A few states have set forth an age, such as Oregon (10 years) and Maryland (8 years), but the majority are either completely silent on the issue or offer only recommendations.

To find out the law in your state, contact your state Department of Child and Family Services. You should be able to find a phone number for them in the state area of your telephone's blue pages or call directory assistance.

What Experts Recommend

Most experts, such as the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), say there is no set age that is appropriate for every child. If there is a law in your state, then of course, that is the minimum age your child should be, but even at that age, your child may not be ready.

Consider Your Child's Maturity and Responsibility

Does your child typically follow your house rules? Can you trust them in your absence? Will they be responsible about contacting you and being safe while you're gone? In addition to your child's age, you should consider if they are mature or immature for their age.

Prepare Them Before You Leave

Before you leave your child alone, it is important that they are prepared for emergencies that may arise, know what they should be doing to occupy their time, and aren't afraid of being alone.

The following checklist should be a good indicator that your child is ready. It is meant to be helpful but in no way guarantees the safety of your child. Ultimately, you as a parent are responsible for the decision on whether or not your child is ready and accept the consequences of your decision.

Is My Child Ready to Stay Home Alone? A Checklist:

- Child meets age requirements of your state or is at least 10 years old
- Child knows and can repeat your address
- Child knows and can repeat your phone number
- Child is familiar with two phone numbers to call in case of emergency
- Child has demonstrated he/she can carry a key responsibly
- Child knows never to tell a phone or door caller that you are not home. Role play different scenarios so they can practice what to say and do.
- Child knows at least two exits in case of a fire
- Child knows what items are off limits in your absence (guns, alcohol, matches, drugs, adult television programming, the Internet, etc.) and agrees to leave them alone.
- Child knows the rules for having anyone else over in your absence and agrees to follow them.
- Child has a list of approved activities to occupy their time in your absence
- Child can use kitchen appliances responsibly and confidently
- Child has demonstrated the use of door and window locks
- Child agrees never to go anywhere with anyone without your permission or your family's secret password. (Create a word no one could guess. Teach it to your child and instruct them never to go anywhere with anyone unless they know the secret word. Even then, if they feel unsure, tell them to trust their instincts and call you first.)
- Child knows to check in when they come home from school or an activity and at intervals you request.
- Child is not fearful of being home alone

Other Things to Consider

- Children need and crave your attention. Leave them alone only if you must, and only if you believe they are mature enough to be safe. Research shows that [latchkey kids](#) (kids that spend hours alone every day after school) are more likely to become involved in violence, sexual activity, or drugs and alcohol than those that are adequately supervised.
- If you need to be gone for extended periods of time, try to find a responsible caregiver or friend they can stay with.
- Experts recommend that you never leave a child home alone overnight
- If you are low-income, you may qualify for child care assistance. Contact your state Department of Child and Family Services for more information.

For more information:

National Crime Prevention Council's [Home Alone: A Parents' Guide](#)

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's [Home Alone Child](#)

National Network for Child Care's [Home Alone](#)

You may find this related Tips for Parents helpful:

[Tips for Parents: Child Care Complaints](#)

[Tips for Parents: Latch Key Kids](#)